

LAWRENCE SOMMERS

July 24, 2000

Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is July 24th of the year 2000. I'm Jeff Charnley, interviewing Dr. Lawrence Sommers for the Michigan State University Oral History Project, for the sesquicentennial to be commemorated five years from now in the year 2005.

Dr. Sommers, as you can see, we're tape-recording this session. Do you give us permission to record this interview?

Sommers: Yes.

Charnley: I'd like to start first with your educational and professional background. Where did you go to school, and how did you ultimately end up at Michigan State?

Sommers: Bachelor's degree at University of Wisconsin, master's at the University of Wisconsin, and Ph.D. at Northwestern University. So within the Big Ten.

Charnley: Were you born in Wisconsin?

Sommers: I was born in Wisconsin.

Charnley: What year was your B.A.?

Sommers: B.A. was in 1943, and M.A. was when I got back from the war in '46, and a Ph.D. in 1950.

Charnley: We've asked all the veterans that we've interviewed where did they serve and what units were you in.

Sommers: I served in North Africa and Italy. I was trained as an infantryman, but actually because at the camp I was in in Northern Africa, the head of postal unit was interested in somebody who had a college degree, and I was apparently the only one there. Actually, while I was there, about 2,000 of us went over as replacements. This was the time when Rommel was making big progress in North Africa, and most of my buddies actually were injured or killed. I was still waiting in the pool and finally got into this post unit and stayed with it actually during the whole war. Went through North Africa to Italy and all the way up the peninsula right behind the 5th Army.

Charnley: So General Clark's--

Sommers: General Clark, right.

Charnley: Then when you got out, did you use the G.I. Bill for your graduate work?

Sommers: Used the G.I. Bill, yes. Yes, I had trained to be a high school teacher at Wisconsin, actually.

Charnley: In what field?

Sommers: In geography and social science, and it was the G.I. Bill that brought me into the Ph.D. program, and the reason I'm here, actually, rather than someplace else.

Charnley: Did you have any high school teaching experience ultimately?

Sommers: No, just practice teaching.

Charnley: And then because of the war you went onto that. What was your area of interest or your dissertation at Wisconsin?

Sommers: The dissertation, I did it on the fishing industry in a county in western Norway, which is also interesting. I was going to do a study on the harbor of Milwaukee, and a professor from the University of Oslo came through Northwestern and found I was of Norwegian ancestry, actually, so we chatted, and he had a project in western Norway. So I got some support from him and also from the Social Science Research Council and the American Scandinavian Foundation, and ended up in Norway.

Charnley: Did you speak Norwegian?

Sommers: I do now. I learned it, actually. I was there for a year and learned the language and I've going back every since. I've made about probably, I think's it's twenty-four, twenty-five trips back to Norway since that first one.

Charnley: Who in your family emigrated?

Sommers: My mother and father both emigrated.

Charnley: So you're first generation. They came right to Wisconsin?

Sommers: They came to Wisconsin, yes, right.

Charnley: What part of Norway did they come from?

Sommers: My father was from thirty miles south of Oslo, and my mother about sixty-five miles northwest of Oslo.

Charnley: When you went back, did it meet your expectations the first time you were in Norway?

Sommers: Well, I think most people that are emigrated, they tend to look at the big bright things, you know, things that they remember, the positive things. In that sense, the strawberries weren't quite as big, the apples weren't quite as rosy as they described them to me, you know, after they'd been for a few years. So, in that sense, it was sort of a disappointment. I stayed with relatives over there, had a marvelous time with the family, and they helped me learn Norwegian. They couldn't speak English, so I had to.

Charnley: Sounds like the best teachers.

Sommers: I learned Norwegian, actually. I never had a course in the grammar of Norwegian and learned to vocabulary by reading the daily newspaper and talking with my uncle and aunt and their son, who I go to be very close to, actually.

Charnley: How did you approach your dissertation? Did you interview fishermen or did you use data or was it a combination?

Sommers: I used both. I interviewed fishermen and became quite well acquainted, actually, with a number of them. Most of them, actually, can speak English over there. Somewhere along the line the conversation was

switched to Norwegian, and it was always a satisfaction to me to get them to switch to Norwegian, which said I was doing pretty well in that language. So it was an excellent experience.

Charnley: What was your main discovery as a result of your dissertation, your main thesis?

Sommers: It was primarily the distribution of the various kinds of products and how they were marketing them. There was one product in particular, a clipfish, which is a dried cod, a very distinct product which at that time was, actually, was dried on rocks, sun-dried, air-dried. Now they're doing it, actually, mechanically or with artificial heat. The major finding was the degree of support that fishing was giving to various parts, geography, distribution and things. What I came up with then was a distribution of the various aspects of the fish industry in that section, which emphasized the catching of herring, which is a very temperamental fish. It actually disappears from the coast. At that time, actually, it was quite abundant.

Charnley: Were you able to publish any articles?

Sommers: Yes, published several articles out of it.

Charnley: How was it that you ultimately came to Michigan State?

Sommers: Well, I had made the normal applications to various institutions. There were three that I was a candidate for, the University of Nebraska, Rutgers University, and Michigan State. I was invited here for an interview, and I liked it very much, so we made an agreement.

Charnley: The rest is history.

Sommers: The rest is history.

Charnley: So you were basically here your whole career.

Sommers: I was here my whole career, actually. I was here as a faculty member, and then up, chair of the department, and then eventually assistant provost for a period of four years. In all, I've served fifty years.

Charnley: When you first came, did you realistically think you were going to stay, or was there a point in your career where you said, "Well, I guess I'm going to stay here"?

Sommers: Well, there were several chances for me to move elsewhere, but when it came down to looking at the considerations, I was able to be moved forward to a better position and was recognized here very rapidly, actually, from assistant professor to associate with tenure, and then at that time also became chair of the department, and had the chance to grow and develop a department here from almost nothing to one of the major departments in the country. So, in essence, the opportunities for growth were here. I didn't have to move, as many people did, to other institutions in order to get promotions. The opportunities were here. We were a growing institution, as you well know, from about 15,000 when I came and grew rapidly from there very shortly up into 30,000 and 40,000 students.

Charnley: When you first came, what were some of your first impressions? Obviously, Wisconsin and Northwestern being Big Ten schools, MSU wasn't part of the big ten then, right?

Sommers: No, it wasn't at the time.

Charnley: But what were some of your early impressions, if you remember anything when you first arrived?

Sommers: I was impressed with the area being open and actually very attractive. I interviewed here in the spring, and the flowers around here are as pretty as you can find anywhere. This is just a tremendously beautiful campus in the spring. So I was impressed by the campus. It was a challenging geography department at that time. The chair of the department was a geologist by the name of Burnquist [phonetic], and he, actually, was also very interested in geography. So there was a sort of a rapport that developed between that person and myself. I interviewed Dean Emmons [phonetic], who was one of the early Science and Arts deans here, and he was a very, very influential and persuasive individual. Interviewed over in Morrill Hall, where we were as a department. In the fall when I arrived, we moved into the new Natural Science Building.

Charnley: Did you have any early contacts with President [John A.] Hannah?

Sommers: My contacts with President Hannah, actually, were not very close. We were sort of aware of one another, but there really wasn't much opportunity. President Hannah, actually, was a kind of administrator who didn't really need the close contact with faculty and didn't develop it very well. I remember one incident which sort of illustrates this. [Harry S.] Truman was developing the Point Four Program, which was in various parts of the world. We wrote a letter to him saying, as geographers, the world is what we studied, we would like to assist him and work with him in a way that was useful. His reply was, "I expect you do that." [Laughter] So there was no need, actually, to contact him.

But he was tremendous administrator and developed this institution in a way which wouldn't have happen, certainly not as quickly as it did, without his capabilities and his degree of ability to work with the legislature, work in terms of developing the campus, both with its physical nature and then academically. One of the outstanding presidents, actually, of the twentieth century, I think, in higher education.

Charnley: In dealing with the issue of the geology-geography department, at what point did it go its separate way?

Sommers: It split in 1955.

Charnley: And you were chair at that time?

Sommers: No. No, I was the first chair of the department. There's sort of an interesting story, because I was sort of the young Turk in the department. I expected that one of the senior professors would become the chair. I was very surprised that I was called into Dean Emmons'--actually, that time it had been Milton Milder [phonetic] in the deanship of Science and Arts. So Milt Milder and Eric Kimber [phonetic], from history, I don't know if you ever came across him.

Charnley: I don't think he was here when I came. I came in '78.

Sommers: Yes, he was gone by that time. So they offered me the headship at that time, I took a night without sleep to consider it, and finally decided, well, I'll give it a try, and it worked out very well.

Charnley: Do you remember, when you took over as chair, how many faculty did you have?

Sommers: There were five of us.

Charnley: And then did it expand to what size?

Sommers: At one point we were up to twenty-two.

Charnley: So the department's history kind of reflects the general history of the university at that time.

Sommers: We grew a little faster than that, I think. We were five, as I said, and we had a master's degree, and then in '55, we were brash enough to suggest a Ph.D. program, and we got that approved in '57, and that grew, actually, into one of the leading ten or fifteen departments with Ph.D.s in the country by the 1960s and early seventies.

Charnley: Was there any particular area of specialty that the department really excelled in within geography?

Sommers: We were very strong in land use, land-use evaluation, and also in physical geography we were quite strong, looking at the physiography and the topography and its arrangement and distribution importance. So, physical geography, economic geography and then in certain regions of the world. We were very strong in the geography of Africa. I was teaching the geography of Europe, we had two people were teaching in the geography of Asia. So regional geography was very strong at that time, and the systematic and more topical emphasis has developed more recently.

We had very strong techniques, especially in remote sensing and cartography. Remote sensing was taught by the geologists and geographers here during World War II to service people. So we had a very strong air photo-interpretation program, which subsequently was called remote sensing. It has continued to be a strength even now in the geographic information system and the computer arrangements. This was developed all by hand when I did it back in 1977. We're now revising that and the maps are entirely drawn by computer.

Charnley: The disk is the atlas of Michigan.

Sommers: Yes.

Charnley: So, done pretty much without computer.

Sommers: That was done entirely by hand. We didn't have a computer at that time. We employed thirty-one students at various degrees of competence, actually, to work with us in terms of the technical aspects of cartography, supervised by faculty. I think it also probably serves, at least at that time, but maybe still, has been a project that involved most wide distribution of faculty and students over the entire university.

Charnley: A real collaborative effort.

Sommers: It was a real collaborative effort. Over thirty faculty from various departments. We had people writing the sections of it. When we got to history, we had Madison Kuhn. All over campus then we picked out specialists to help us with the areas that they were familiar with.

Charnley: And they're doing new version, a high-tech version?

Sommers: That's under way now. I'm serving as a senior consultant. It's actually being developed in three different phases. They just completing now a CD-rom version, which will be used in education here and throughout the state and hopefully in the school systems. Then there will be a web that's in the process so that information will be readily available through the web, and then we hope to do the paper-bound volume for the centennial, for the sesquicentennial in 2005.

Charnley: A couple of our faculty members are Native American, and they're involved with the Native American aspects of that. They have some detailed maps and first-hand knowledge and background on some of the Michigan tribes.

Sommers: Right.

Charnley: Let's talk about maybe some of your own teaching. You mentioned that you taught the geography of Europe class.

Sommers: I taught the geography of Europe class.

Charnley: Did you teach during your entire career in terms of administration?

Sommers: Yes, I made sure that I kept teaching so that I didn't lose that ability. Even when I was full-time assistant dean in International Programs at one time, when I was chair, I always taught one or two courses a year, if not more. When I was in the provost's office, I actually continued to teach at least one course a year.

Charnley: What do you think that value that teaching experience gives to administrators?

Sommers: Well, it gives you touch, gets you in touch with the basic purpose of the institution, that is, you try to educate our young people to the best of our ability. If you're going to administer, you need to know what's going on with one of the major functions of the institution, which is teaching. Also, then keeping up with it means that you shouldn't stay an administrator forever, and when you stop, if you haven't done it, you have retool yourself, actually, but if you keep at it, you just increase the emphasis a little bit and keep going.

Charnley: What was your favorite technique for getting students to learn and think about geography? Did you have any particular favorite method you used?

Sommers: Well, drawing on the background the students themselves as to where they came from, and then trying to get them to see, based on the viewpoint of geography, what area they were born or where they went to school. The

total composition of a class provided you, actually, with a great deal of kind of personal expertise, but they didn't really know how to put it together. I think one of the things that geography has a role to play is trying to present and understand how big the physical and the cultural things fit together and the reasons for being as they are and trying to understand the sense of place. So in the Europe course, I would draw on those that had some experience in traveling in Europe, and in other courses, I taught economic geography, along with Europe, and then also the theory and philosophy of the discipline. That's primarily for majors and graduate students.

The only thing that's real difficult for geography and, actually, to some extent it's also true for history, that the history and geography of an area is so commonplace. They've lived in it for many years, but they don't understand how to put it together and try to explain why it is as it is, as the characteristics are entirely different from place to place, this understanding place, understanding the nature of a place, and how it's developed and what the importance of that kind of arrangement is.

I went to a lecture one time by an Indian from a tribe in Canada, and he was emphasizing how the Indians developed a sense of place, and how important, actually, it was in their development and their survival and their ability to use the resources that they had in the areas in which the tribes are located. It's that kind of a relationship between the cultural and economic and the political and social connections with the physical environment, how that works together and why it is as is and how important that is, actually, in understanding what places are like in the various parts of the world.

Charnley: Did you use family history, encourage students to bring that in then in any way, or in terms of the Europeans because some of them probably European, was from European background?

Sommers: Yes, used their background, and actually a number of them had taken trips to Europe, which they would draw on, and I would use. I had thousands of slides, actually, which I have taken, and I used a lot of slides illustrating what I was talking about. In the economic geography, which I taught, I taught five sections of it a quarter when I first came.

Charnley: Five sections.

Sommers: The same course, and the last section was a trying experience, actually.

Charnley: You probably taught it entirely differently.

Sommers: Yes. Well, you start and you stop in different places, too. You don't make the same progress, so you have to know where you left off in that section the last time you taught it.

I grew up on a farm, actually, and we had a small dairy farm in southern Wisconsin, so we had some cash crops in order to make a go, especially during the recession, and tobacco was one of them. I used to use tobacco as an illustration of the degree of labor that was involved in farming, because it's one of the most labor-intensive crops, actually, that you can find. So I'd draw on my own experience, actually, in terms of where that fitted into the nature of economic geography.

Charnley: In looking at the students and their preparation, did you see difference in what they came to with their understanding of geography from the beginning of your career until later on?

Sommers: Actually, it continued to be problem to get them to understand really the major purpose of the discipline, to think about the understanding of what places are like. You can memorize things, and this is mostly what happened when geography was taught in secondary schools, in primary schools, actually,, but if you really get them to understand the purpose and what actually what geography brings to understanding, that's been difficult to get across and still it's the same problem, actually.

Charnley: In looking at your international experience, let's talk a little bit about that. Did you have any Fulbright professorships or any sabbatical where you traveled?

Sommers: Yes.

Charnley: What were some of those?

Sommers: Well, the first, when I was in Norway for a year, as I said, that was supported by the American and Scandinavian Foundation and the Social Science Research Council. I had a fellowship from both of those to support my work there for a year. The Office of Naval Research was involved early with the geographic office of the Office of Naval Research. They had a committee on which I served for three years, which was to help guide the geographic components of that office in Washington, D.C. They supported half a year. This was in Denmark at that time in 1953.

Then after I became chair of the department, there's the policy that an administrator can take three months' leave every three years, rather than a half year or a full year every seventh year, and I took that religiously. Every three years I would go off to Europe during the summer and leave the department to somebody else here during that period. So I support myself, actually. I used my salary during that period for travel. I've been to Europe, and especially to Scandinavia, on several occasions where they would invite for a period of a few weeks to a few months. This happened three or four times.

Charnley: Was that with a particular university or did it vary?

Sommers: It varied, yes. Actually, that's continued up to the present. I was invited just a few weeks ago to Sweden to give a lecture as part of an honor that was being given to one of my Swedish colleagues, where he got a prize which was given to him by the Anthropology and Geography Association, actually, delivered by the King of

Sweden, and he had a chance--this is Professor Wieland [phonetic]--to invite four people from various parts of the world to participate in a seminar, which he was supposed to do after the presentation of this medal, and I was one of the people who was invited to participate, which is very, very nice.

Charnley: Had you known him?

Sommers: I've known him for quite a while, yes. He lives in northern Sweden.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Charnley: When the tape ended, we were talking about international study that Dr. Sommers had completed and done during the course of his career. Were you involved at MSU in the International Studies Program? How were you involved in that?

Sommers: Oh, yes. When we got the Ford Foundation grant, which is what started the--and ended up recommending a dean's office in international programs, they had assembled committees or advisory groups working on various aspects of international affairs and how it should be developed in the university, I was on that year-long study to begin with, which ended up in recommending that we develop an Office of International Programs. Then I served on a number of committees, eventually was involved in the area study programs that were developed here.

I participated with Professor [Walter] Fee in history on the Asian area, had summer programs each summer, and that actually grew into the Asian Studies Center, so I think I played a role, actually, in development of the Asian Studies Center.

In the African Studies Center, Marvin Solomon, who was in the natural science Basic College area here, he had been to Africa. I got to know him, actually, through bowling. We had a bowling league. So the two of us got

together, and we were brainstorming about what we could do to get that better recognized. So I think the two of us had a role to play in the development of the African Studies Center on campus.

Then in 1979 and '80, I was asked to chair a review of international programs, which resulted in this publication, actually.

Charnley: *International Education at Michigan State in an Interdependent World.*

Sommers: They did this every ten years, a comprehensive view, and there was a large number of people, important people on campus, who were involved in that study. The major part of this is recognizing the independent world, that we're no longer dominating and we have to relate to various parts of the world. I think that that was an important contribution which I made in sharing that with that group.

We depend on one another, and, actually, we're becoming increasingly in that direction. We're not longer a dominant part of the world when it comes to various things that take place, and some of the smaller countries have as much a voice as we do, such as what we're doing now in Korea and other parts of the world.

Charnley: At the time you did the Asian studies, what were the countries involved in that, do you remember?

Sommers: Well, we were primarily involved in Southeast Asia--Japan, China, and the countries of the southeastern peninsula of the continent. India, to some extent. But we had a summer program every year where we would normally either use some of own faculty or bring people to provide additional expertise to study that part of the world. So Professor Fee and I organized that, actually, for a number of years. As I said, that's what developed into the African Studies Center, which is now one of the strongest in the country.

You were asking about the international role. Then I became an assistant dean, actually, of international programs and one summer took the place of Dean [Ralph] Smuckler in keeping that deanship going. Then as an

assistant provost for three years, this part of the university was also an area of responsibility, so I continued. Actually, I continued in one way or the other within international programs my entire career.

Charnley: And travel's been part of your retirement, too?

Sommers: Travel's been part of retirement, actually. I've been involved in two international worldwide groups. We have an International Geographical Union or Congress, which is a worldwide organization. They develop commissions to develop certain topics which need to be worked on. For the last twelve years we've been working on areas of marginality, where they're not doing as well as they could as a region. We get various parts of the world. We have twelve full-time members, which I represent the United States. This, actually, is my last year on that. We meet in a different part of the world each summer, so that's provided travel all over the world, from Argentina to Zimbabwe, to Switzerland, to Norway, to Prague in the Czech Republic.

Charnley: Is this an independent group or is it United Nations-related?

Sommers: There's associations nationally. This is the association for the entire world for geography. It's called the International Geographical Union, and almost every country of the world is part of that, a member. They're having a meeting this summer in Seoul, Korea. I was supposed to go to that, but I won't be able to make it this year for various reasons.

Charnley: When we are looking at the history of Michigan State in the last fifty years, we've been trying to get the information from faculty members and administrators regarding the various presidents and provosts with whom they worked. We talked about John Hannah. Did you have much contact with Dr. [Clifton R.] Wharton [Jr.]?

Sommers: Quite a bit. I had more contact with Dr. Wharton than I had with Hannah.

Charnley: How would you assess his presidency?

Sommers: Well, I think the time and place, for various reasons he was, I think, very important to us. One was that he was an Afro-American, which we needed at the time, actually, to represent us in higher education. But, as well, geographically he was much more closely involved with the international economic and geographics situation.

Charnley: His scholarly background and expertise and then his world travel, too. So he had a knowledge of that, direct knowledge.

Sommers: So in that sense I was closer to President Wharton than I ever was to President Hannah. So I got to appreciate him, and I think he got to appreciate me. He wrote me a very nice letter when I retired from the university. So with Wharton it was very good.

Gordon Guyer I've known as a colleague, actually, over in the Natural Science Building. So Gordon was a real friend for longstanding.

Walter Adams. Walter actually is interested in economic geography. We had a faculty member by the name of Vingy [phonetic], Clarence Vingy. So Clarence, Vingy, and myself, we had a sort of relationship with Walter Adams, which was very interesting.

[Edgar L.] Harden I really didn't know and had very little contact with him. That was during the latter stages of my academic career. Who have I missed?

Charnley: You left the chair in what year?

Sommers: I left the chair in '79.

Charnley: So Dr. [M. Cecil] Mackey was president at that time.

Sommers: Yes. Through Mackey I was very active in academic governance with the steering committee of the university, and so I worked as the chair of the steering committee. The contact with Mackey was frequent and close, so I got to work with Mackey in a very, very positive way.

Charnley: What were the key issues at that time? It was what, the early eighties?

Sommers: That was in '80. That's right.

Charnley: What were the key issues at that time at the university, if you remember?

Sommers: An issue always had been to get the faculty at large to understand the importance of having a governance unit which is strong, active, and has influence in the issues of the university. So the issues at that time were the minority relationships. That was a very, very important problem. The increasing importance of women was another problem, and getting the ratios of women up in various parts of the university so that they were more representative of that faction of the society.

But a problem has always been to get the faculty to recognize that they should be involved with academic governance, that they can a role and that their voice is important actually to the administration. So I had a chance to see that from both the department administration as well as university administration.

Charnley: Who were some of the other faculty that were influential at that time in academic governance?

Sommers: Fred Williams. An economist, economic specialist in world trade.

Charnley: Mordecai Krennan [phonetic]?

Sommers: Max Krennan. Right.

Charnley: Was Henry Silverman involved with it?

Sommers: Henry Silverman was involved. I served on many standing committees university-wide where I got to know a large number of faculty. That in itself is one of the advantages actually of serving in that, is that you get to know and to work with other parts of the university, individuals.

Charnley: Beyond your unit.

Sommers: Other than your own unit. Right.

Charnley: Was President Mackey supportive of the efforts of academic governance?

Sommers: He was very supportive, right. Mackey was misunderstood. I think he was one of the best presidents we had, in terms of knowing the role of a university president. The major problem that Cecil had was the way he worked with individuals. They often didn't realize what he was after, and relations weren't quite as smooth as they could have been.

Charnley: The relationship with the board at that time, was that a cause of problems?

Sommers: The relationship with the board was, I think, better than it was with the faculty.

Charnley: The tough economic times in the state, did it affect that at all?

Sommers: Oh, yes. That went up and down, of course. This is during President Mackey?

Charnley: President Mackey, right.

Sommers: Well, he was, I think, again, reasonably successful working with the state legislature. It's just that the mannerism and the way in which he operated was not, I don't think, appreciated by people, especially the faculty members, because he was not as close, and sometimes he was very abrupt in his mannerisms.

Charnley: Were there cuts being advocated or made that was part of the problem?

Sommers: The budget was part of the problem. I'm just trying to rack my memory as to what years those cuts took place.

Charnley: Yes, I know. Seems like ancient history, but it's only been twenty years almost. Were you surprised when Dr. Mackey resigned?

Sommers: Yes. Well, he had a chance to go to University of Hawaii, and that didn't finally materialize. Then he had a chance to stay on here. I think there was an opportunity to go elsewhere as well in the United States, other than Hawaii.

Charnley: How was it that you became involved in the search for the new president after he left?

Sommers: As a member of the steering committee, as chair of the steering committee, actually, I was supposed at only the board meetings to represent the faculty. So I got to know a number of the board members very well--Robert Sawyer. I worked with Dade [phonetic] on the presidential search for when I was chair of that with, when we got [John A.] DiBiaggio.

Charnley: Blanche Martin.

Sommers: Blanche Martin was on. I got to know Blanche quite well. So what I'm trying to say is that I got to know the board members quite well, and there were several candidates for that search position. I worked with those board members who made that decision as to who that was to be. So I think that's what influenced them, was their knowledge of me as a person and my abilities to work in that kind of situation, so I was appointed.

Charnley: How tough was it finding a new president at that time?

Sommers: We had a lot of candidates, but most of them wanted it to be not known that they were searching or that they were in the process of being a candidate. So keeping it confidential that these major university presidents from all over the country were candidates, actually, that was one of the problems that DiBiaggio wanted to be sure of, that his candidacy would be kept confidential. We had, as I recall, nearly 100 candidates for the position, and then those were whittled down and we finally got it down to a group of three, and then finally one.

Charnley: Were there any particular criteria that either the board or that the committee came up with that thought that the university needed at that time?

Sommers: We were looking for somebody that had the kind of background and reputation where they would have the confidence of the university and the faculty, that had shown that they did have the kind of traits, characteristics

that make for a successful president, and some of those that had already been presidents and were successful. We were looking for somebody who appreciated a land-grant kind of university, and a number of them actually had experience in that direction. But primarily we were interested in somebody that could lead the institution as it continued to grow and somebody who could deal successfully with the various segments of the institution and the state that they had to work with in leading an institution like this.

Everybody has different strong points, and the strong point that we saw in DiBiaggio was his ability to work with various people. Now, it ended up, he had difficulty with certain elements here eventually, but he was a very, very good person in working with alumni and working with various kinds of groups, had a kind of personality which was very engaging, actually.

Charnley: Do you remember how his name first came up in the search? In other words, did we call him or did he call us?

Sommers: No, he applied. Essentially we had--I don't recall the exact number--it was 70 or 100 different applications. That was a very interesting experience, actually, to follow all that through to its conclusions.

Charnley: You mentioned that you had personal contact as chair with candidate DiBiaggio. How did you convince to stay a candidate or become a candidate?

Sommers: Well, primarily convincing him that his name would be kept secret until the final stages of a process, that we would not release any information concerning that he was a candidate locally. It was primarily a confidentiality problem. He was about to drop out, because he said he was--I'm trying to think of the institution where he was at the time.

Charnley: Connecticut.

Sommers: Connecticut. He had a good job there, had been successful, so he didn't want to damage his institutional relationships there and his position. So talking with him, the seriousness and the way in which we were going about the process. As I said, at the end of our conversation, he decided to stay with it. I thin to this day he would acknowledge the fact that I was the reason that he stayed in the process.

Charnley: What were your contacts with him after he became president?

Sommers: Here?

Charnley: Yes. Your job at that time?

Sommers: I was still in academic governance in various ways, so that there was that kind of a contact. Had various reasons, actually, to consult with him. So that continued, actually.

Charnley: What about some of the various provosts that you had worked with? Any comments about them?

Sommers: Let's see. I worked with [John] Cantlon. I worked with [Lee] Winder, with McQuiddy [phonetic]. McQuiddy was only dean, dean of the social science college.

Charnley: And then Gwen Andrew.

Sommers: And Grew Andrew. I worked very closely with--most closely, actually--with Gwen Andrew and Lee Winder. Gwen was, of course, a member of the College of Social Sciences. Actually, she supported this project here where I proposed that we take every position that we had in the department along with some of the graduate

students and had them each look at it in terms of what the applications of their field was, and then invited in about twenty major people who were in the discipline from various parts of the country. So she supported that. She was a very good supporter of geography, a dean. She never became provost, but this was at the dean's level.

Winder was provost during the latter stages of my tenure as chair, and he was also very, very supportive. I should have stepped down earlier if it wasn't for him. He wanted me to continue.

Charnley: So he convinced you to stay on?

Sommers: Yes. One shouldn't stay in these administrative positions too long, you know. They've been shorter and shorter as time progressed. I was chair for twenty-four years and you could never do that now, and I would never want to do it, knowing what I know now, for that length of time. But it was a growing period. The challenge was there. The nature of the position was actually quite appealing in terms of what it provided in the way of challenges and rewards, and to see the growth of the discipline in the university, which we thought was very, very important. For this kind of institution, geography should play a major role in a land-grant institution such as this.

Charnley: Your working with David Scott, were you assistant to him?

Sommers: I was assistant provost. I was going to retire, you know, and I was in a luncheon which they have every year for retirees in Bradenton, Florida. I was down there. I hadn't retired at the time, but they had this lunch for the retirees in that area. So I went to that lunch, and Scott was the major speaker.

After the lunch was over, he said, "Let's go into this next room. I want to talk to you for a while." It was then that he offered me the chance to become the assistant provost. That was in the spring. It was only supposed to be for that summer. Well, he wrote me another letter and talked to me about if I would continue for a little bit. It ended up actually being a three-year stint.

Charnley: So he was the head arm-twister at the time. What were your main duties as assistant provost or your oversight?

Sommers: The academic part of the institution. The structure and the relationships with all of the units of the university.

Charnley: That was the period when there was a lot of review in the curriculum and program. Could you talk a little bit about some of those? CRUE and CARRAGE [phonetic] and all of those acronyms, I know came in under David Scott.

Sommers: Yes, they came in to the office when they were developing the agenda and the nature of what this group was supposed to be working towards. They had a working draft, actually, as to what the role and purpose and agenda should be, which I didn't agree with. I think I had a major role to play in getting this turned around to where it was reviewing actually the nature of the undergraduate education program. They had it more in terms of the role of women and the role of minorities in the institution, as the major role, which were good objectives, but actually didn't cover the upgrading and looking at the problems of the undergraduate instruction and the nature of what the academic programs were accomplishing. So I served then with that committee as a representative of the provost's office and, again, I think, played a rather important role.

Charnley: That was the Council to Review Undergraduate Education.

Sommers: That's right.

Charnley: How about the semester transition? How were you involved in that?

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Charnley: This is tape two.

We're talking about the transition to semesters, and I asked Dr. Sommers what was your role in the switch from terms to semesters.

Sommers: Well, David Scott was very, very much convinced that we should go to semesters, and we had meetings actually with every college, which was on a variety of things, but this was one of the things that was brought up in each of those meetings. The faculty wasn't quite sure that they should change, especially agriculture and some of the colleges, which felt that the three quarters, especially for the use of the summer, was much better than the semester. But David Scott remained convinced, and we finally developed these all-university discussions about this and then had a vote.

The vote, as you may recall, was very, very close. It only won by a few votes, and there was some absentee ballots that came in later, and if they had been counted, actually, the issue would have lost. So it was something that Scott was very, very interested in accomplishing, and he eventually made it.

Charnley: So the academic governance was key in that decision ultimately or supporting what he wanted.

Sommers: Of course, I was in the provost's office at that time.

Charnley: Did you favor it? The switch to semesters?

Sommers: Yes, yes. It's provided, I think, a better chance for student involvement over a longer period of time and developing certain kinds of things--writing and projects which can be developed much better over a semester

length rather than a quarter. Then we were spending an awful lot of time in getting ready for a quarter and carrying on the various methods of getting the enrollments and classes. So it was all out of administration.

Charnley: That reduced it by a third. So you were in that much longer than you anticipated in that job. Then did you ultimately retire right after.

Sommers: I ultimately retired from that job. That's right. Started out as an acting assistant provost, and he towards the end made it a regular position. Good experience. I often felt that looking at it from that position at the fourth floor of the Administration Building is something that, and looking at the entire institution from that perspective, I felt after I had been there for a while, that every faculty member should have a chance to see what the university looks like from that perspective and that kind of a responsibility, where you're not looking at your own course, your own department, your own research. One of the best ways to proceed for the entire institution, and that broad perspective is something that faculty don't have a chance to see from their position as a faculty member in a unit. Even two weeks, I think, would have changed the perspective of many faculty members, if they had a chance to see, and the amount of complaint that goes on concerning the higher administration--that we have too many of them, that they're not doing what they should be doing--I think that they would have a much better understanding of the total responsibility and the passion and the time and the importance which they place on what they're doing and the time of the--not only time but the length of time and the total responsibility which they perceive for the position and the importance with each of those decisions that they're making, you know, one has for the entire institution. You just can't see that unless you're up there and participating in that process.

Charnley: Did you have any other contact with the president during President DiBiaggio's administration?

Sommers: Well, as a member of the provost's, you know, we had to see what DiBiaggio--

Charnley: He was president when you retired.

Sommers: He was president when I retired. Right. So there was some relationship between he and Scott and the provost's office. So in that respect there was a reasonable of contact, and also when I was in the steering committee, he was president and relating to the board, so I saw him there in that kind of context as well.

Charnley: What was your position on his leaving? Obviously your opinion of that or the struggle between the board and the issue of athletics and academics. what was your position on that?

Sommers: Well, I thought that DiBiaggio had been doing a good job, and yet for him to leave based on the relationship with just a few board members and [George] Perles and athletics was just unfortunate, that that should interfere with--he got very personally involved, and I think it affected him very seriously actually because of the amount of talk that was going on, the kind of talk that was going on. Would probably interfere with most people in terms of their staying with and doing the job that they were hired to do.

Charnley: In your retirement, have you have had any added contacts with the university?

Sommers: Well, I continue to be on three committees in the department. I've served as senior consultant on the atlas of Michigan committee. I have a meeting actually on the eighth of August. I've felt since retiring that the university is not utilizing the tremendous talent that still exists walking around the streets of this area. You'll find out when you retire that you're suddenly from a person that had some clout on the campus to a nobody. Any institution actually. In many, many ways rightfully so. This concern with what they're doing, what the future, what the young faculty are bringing in, and not those that are passé and have gone off. But there still is a lot of perspective, a lot of talent in these people that have retired, that could be utilized, I think, by not only this university but higher education *in toto* around the country.

Walter Johnson and I were working with the retirees association, and we got into the faculty handbook statement on the role of retirees and what they might do, the kinds of things that they might do, and that statement is in the current faculty handbook. So in that sense I think I've had a role. Also, in my association, the Association of American Geographers, we've developed a retired geographers organization, which is an affinity with the national association with the National Association of American Geographers. I've served and I've just finished a two-year as a board member of that retired geographer association, and we're trying to do in geography what I think should be done in the university, where you try to find out how retired people can fit, what they can contribute, and how they could be better utilized, those that want to. There are those that don't. There are people who would like to just fish or golf or do something other than what they had been doing, and they should have that opportunity. But there are at least fifty per cent of those that retired have a desire to continue on in some aspect of their competence, and that isn't being utilized, I don't think, to the extent that it could be and perhaps should be.

Charnley: In looking back at your career here at Michigan State, what would you say has developed to be the most important that you can think of?

Sommers: Well, I think the most important thing probably is to be involved, not only as a teacher in your area of specialization in the development of your unit, but to see how that unit relates to the whole institution, and the importance actually of getting known in various parts of the institution as a--I think that's important as a chair, certainly, because I don't think you can any longer operate a unit in isolation. It's part of the total institution, and I know that there are places where geography and other units have gone out of existence, and one of the major reason, I think, is that they haven't paid attention to how they should relate to the total institution. They're interested in developing their high-level competence in a certain research area or a certain teaching area, not interested in the academic governance of the institution, not interested in relationships of one unit to the other, and that, I don't think, is a way of being successful anymore, that you have to be a part of the institution and operate actually and become useful and enlarging the horizons of an individual department, an individual academic area with it and develop.

So if I had any success as an individual, I think that's one of the things I was conscious of, was developing that relationship with other parts of the university, relating to other academic administrators in various ways. Somebody can't be successful unless they appreciate what you're doing and what you're accomplishing. You've got to work at that. I think that if I had any success, that it was having that as a major objective and carrying it out, I think, sort of successfully.

Charnley: I want to thank you on behalf of the project and for your insights and sharing the time with us. Thank you very much.

Sommers: I hope that you get some good information from a variety of people that will be useful to anybody who wants to look at it in the future.

Charnley: We are, so far. Thanks.

[End of interview]

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